

Topic - Dr. Samuel Johnson's preface to Shakespeare.

Eighteenth - Century writer Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784) is one of the most significant figures in English literature. His fame is due in part to a widely read biography of him, written by his friend James Boswell and published in 1791. Although probably best known for compiling his celebrated dictionary, Johnson was an extremely prolific writer who worked in a variety of fields and forms.

Johnson's points to remember in Preface to Shakespeare:

Shakespeare's characters - are a just representation of human nature as they deal with passions and principles, which are common to humanity. They are also true to the age, sex, profession to which they belong and hence, the speech of one can not be put in the mouth of another. His characters are not exaggerated. Even when the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life.

Shakespeare's plays: - are a store house of practical wisdom and from them can be formulated a philosophy of life. Moreover, his plays represent the different passions and not love alone.

Shakespeare's use of tragic comedy: - Shakespeare has been much criticized for mixing tragedy and comedy, but Johnson defends him in this. Johnson says that in mixing comedy and tragedy, Shakespeare has been true to nature, because even in real life there is

Mingling of good and evil, Joy and Sorrow, tears and smiles, etc. This may be against the classical rule, but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Moreover, tragic comedy being nearer to life combines with itself the pleasure and instruction of both tragedy and comedy.

Shakespeare's use of tragicomedy does not waken the effect of a tragedy because it does not interrupt the progress of passions. In fact, Shakespeare knew that pleasure consisted in variety. Continued melancholy or grief is often not pleasing. Shakespeare had the power to move, whether to tears or laughter.

Shakespeare's comic genius: - Johnson says that comedy came natural to Shakespeare. He seems to produce his comic scenes without much labour, and these scenes are durable and hence their popularity has not suffered with the passing of time. The language of his comic scenes is the language of real life which is neither gross nor over refined, and hence it has not grown obsolete.

Shakespeare writes tragedies with great appearance of toil and study, but there is always something wanting in his tragic scenes. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy instinct.

Johnson's defence of Shakespeare's use of Unities: - Shakespeare's histories are neither tragedy nor comedy and hence he is not required to follow classical rules of Unities. The only he needs to maintain in his histories is the consistency and naturalness in his characters and this he does so faithfully. In his other works, he has well maintained the unity of action. His plots have the variety and complexity of nature, but have a beginning, middle and an end, and

the plot makes gradual advancement towards the denouement. (3)

Shakespeare shows no regard for the Unities of time and place, and ~~is~~ according to Johnson these have troubled the poet more than it has pleased his audience. The observance of these Unities is considered necessary to provide creditability to the drama.

As regards the Unity of time, Shakespeare says that a drama imitates successive actions, and just as they may be represented at successive places, so also they may be represented at different periods, separated by several days. The only condition is that the events must be connected with each other.

Therefore, Unity of action alone is sufficient, and the other two Unities arise from false assumptions. Hence it is good that Shakespeare violates them.

faults of Shakespeare: — Shakespeare writes ~~about~~ without moral purpose and is more careful to please than to instruct. There is no poetic justice in his plays. This fault cannot be excused by the barbarism of his age for justice is a virtue independent of time and place.

Next, his plots are loosely formed, and only a little attention would have improved them. He neglects opportunities of instruction that his plots offer, in fact, he very often neglects the later parts of his plays and so his catastrophes often seem forced and improbable.

There are many faults of chronology and many anachronisms in his play.

His jokes are often gross and licentious. In his navigation, there is much pomp of diction and circumlocution. Navigation in his dramas is often tedious. His set speeches are cold and weak.

Merits of Shakespeare:- He perfected the blank Verse, imparted to it diversity and flexibility and brought it nearer to the language of prose.